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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers take a quick glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



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Time Flies

Step 1: What do you notice?

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the image offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at a photograph to reinforce its title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words.

In response to the question, “What do you notice?” you may hear: *clump of hairlike strands, lead scribbles, dark swirls.*

Step 2: What are you wondering?

After you’ve heard your students’ first observations, you may hear a peppering of questions: *Is this a photograph or a drawing? What are those black lines? Is this thing moving or alive? Is it hard and springy, or soft?*

This is a good time to reveal the photo’s caption and other information about the photo (below). Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption

“I’m interested in the complete shapes that birds produce with their movements. Red-billed choughs, pictured here, live in big groups and sometimes fly in circles, like this spectacular example. Here, I overlapped a series of single images—a photo technique called chronophotography—to create this image.”

“Ornitography #23,” by Xavi Bou for his project, “Ornitographies.” Photo courtesy of Xavi Bou.

Photo facts

- Red-billed choughs have a lifespan of around seven years. In Central Asia, they have been known to take hair from live Himalayan tahrs—a type of wild goat—to build their nests.
- Birds in flocks are able to change direction quickly not just because they are following a leader but also because they see a movement far down the line and anticipate what to do next. This has been called the “chorus-line hypothesis.”
- According to Cornish legend, King Arthur did not die after his last battle, The Battle of Camlann. Instead, his soul migrated into the body of a red-billed chough. The chough’s red bill and legs are said to be Arthur’s blood, when he was mortally wounded by his nephew.
- Most birds have what’s called a vitali organ, a special middle-ear receptor that can sense extremely small changes in atmospheric pressure. The faster the atmospheric pressure falls (indicating an approaching storm), the lower to the ground birds fly to alleviate discomfort caused by the pressure change in their ears.
- Chronophotography is a set of photographs of a moving object, taken to record and exhibit successive phases of motion. Its original purpose was to help scientists study objects in motion, primarily humans and animals.

Step 3: What next?

1. Xavi’s photographs remind us that things change over time and that we have the power to be mindful of these changes. Take 5 minutes to observe something or someone. It can be an animal, the way the trees move, or people interacting. What do you notice? Did you learn something new? Did the 5 minutes go by quickly, or slowly?
2. Crows can use hooked tools and memorize faces. Why do you think humans often see other animals as less intelligent than they actually are? How does this distancing impact our connection with animals?
3. On the island of Jersey, hillside sheep keep the turf short, allowing red-billed choughs to search the ground for insects. The relationship is mutually beneficial since choughs perch on the backs of sheep to remove ticks. Where in your life or your community (school, neighborhood, or town) do you see a mutually beneficial or symbiotic relationship? Why is this connectedness important?
4. In 2015, a red-billed chough named Arthur escaped from the Durrell Wildlife Park in Jersey. He was in captivity to breed and help reintroduce red-billed choughs into the wild. What are your thoughts on keeping animals in captivity? Is captivity necessary? What are realistic and humane alternatives to confining animals?